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SUBJECT: FROM DENIAL TO FEAR - THIS SUMMER, CASABLANCANS TALK ABOUT
TERROR THREAT

¶1. (U) This cable is sensitive but unclassified, please protect accordingly.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: Despite the calm facade in Casablanca since the GOM raised the terrorism threat level on July 6, there is little doubt that its impact has been significant. The July announcement raised questions here about personal safety as well as concerns about the effect on Morocco's economy, particularly its profitable tourism sector. Many Casablanicans we have spoken to are convinced that the terror threat is exaggerated, while others have clearly changed their views on the tranquility they once took for granted. Either way, the subject of terrorism in Morocco is finding its way into every conversation during the long Casablanca summer. End Summary.

Morocco Raises its Threat Level

¶3. (SBU) On July 6, the GOM raised its terrorism threat level to maximum. The government reported that it had no specific threat information but was raising the level due to a number of factors, among them, the upcoming Throne Day holiday, celebrating the monarchy, and the return of thousands of Moroccans living abroad for the annual summer pilgrimage to the homeland. Most recently, in a move which reinforced concerns here, the Al-Qa'ida Organization in the Islamic Maghreb has publicly warned of its intention to proceed with a violent campaign against targets in North Africa.

Reactions to Maximum Threat Level Vary

¶4. (SBU) Initial responses to the increase in the threat level ranged from minimal to dramatic throughout the city. One contact related a story, the day after the threat level announcement, regarding the reaction of her father. The father, a political party founding member and close personal friend and informal advisor to the King, called her from his hospital bed in Paris to tell her not to go out of the house for the weekend due to the imminent danger. Other contacts have said that, as with the March and April bombings in Casablanca, they were initially cautious about where they went in the city, staying away from crowded spots most likely to be targeted. Still others when asked what they thought of the maximum threat level announcement replied "what announcement?"

¶5. (SBU) While some Casablanicans are choosing to stay away from large gatherings, for others the choice is being made for them. The

president of a Casablanca NGO and recipient of MEPI funding told poloff that the organization was forced to cancel a July event to promote youth involvement in the upcoming September elections. The NGO canceled the event when local government officials refused to allow it to go forward due to insufficient security forces in the neighborhood. The inability to provide sufficient security is surprising considering Casablanca is in the process of deploying thousands of new police officers in the city. The NGO is hopeful that local officials will allow them to reschedule the concert in August.

¶16. (U) In a show of support for the GOM, one Moroccan business contact expressed his backing for the Minister of the Interior's call for Moroccan citizens to be watchful of what is happening around them. He believes that the time has come for "all of us to take responsibility." This sentiment has not been echoed by all Moroccans however. An article on terrorism in the recent issue of weekly news magazine, Le Journal, suggests that the GOM wants its citizens to become "informers." The article goes on to say that if this is the case, it proves that Moroccan security and intelligence forces are incapable of accomplishing the task of stopping terrorists.

Economic Backlash

¶17. (U) In the past few weeks, more than one shop owner in the popular Maarif shopping district has said that their business is down. "Why didn't they (the GOM) just keep their mouths shut" a shopkeeper asked poloff recently while discussing the threat level announcement, "there is nothing we can do about it and it just scares people away." While there appear to be many people on the streets of Casablanca this July, some locals say it is far fewer than normal for this time of year, a time when many Moroccans living abroad normally come home for a summer holiday. Restaurant owners note that business is generally down this summer, because of security fears, they believe.

¶18. (SBU) Moreover, there is concern that the current security situation may affect Morocco's important tourism industry. The sector, which in 2005 was responsible for nearly 10 percent of Morocco's GDP, has been growing exponentially for the past few years. The question on many Casablangans' minds is whether the threat of terrorism in the kingdom will affect this trend. A recent newspaper article claimed that after the March and April bombings there were cancellations of reservations in tourist destinations like Marrakech and Agadir and more after the threat level was raised in July. These claims will be difficult to substantiate, however, until after the high tourist season ends. In Casablanca, the owner of a new boutique hotel catering to European businessmen told poloff that his business has definitely slowed since the terrorist incidents in late spring and has not picked back up.

Optimism or Naivete

¶19. (SBU) Comment: There are still many in Morocco, including local government officials, who seem convinced that Algeria's large-scale terrorism will never touch them. Some cite the increased police presence in Casablanca as a good sign that the GOM has the situation in hand. Checkpoints have become commonplace in and around the city. Increased arrests of drug smugglers and illegal migrants, they claim, demonstrate that the GOM is in control. But most importantly, the optimistic tell us, is the fact that terror and suicide bombing is not part of Moroccan culture. However, more pessimistic Casablangans admit sadly that culture is always evolving and that Moroccan extremists are now a reality. End Comment

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